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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 NEW DELHI 000431

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [TBIO](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [IN](#) [CH](#) [BT](#) [DA](#)

KG, MV, NO, RS, TU, KN, CU, VE

SUBJECT: DELHI DIARY, JAN 31 - FEB 8

REF: NEW DELHI 264

11. (U) Below is a compilation of political highlights from Embassy New Delhi for January 31- February 8, 2008 that did not feature in our other reporting:

- India to host Summit of India-Africa Forum in April
- Leaders Continue to Beat a Path to India's Door
- Three UP MPs Disqualified, Telling By-elections to Follow
- BJP Renews Battle Against Election Commissioner
- Chavez to Address Indian Communist Parties?
- Another Bomb Blast in Bhutan
- Bhutan Prepares for Bird Flu Spread from West Bengal
- Controversy Persuades Sania Mirza to Skip Bangalore Open

India to Host Summit of India-Africa Forum in April

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12. (SBU) In a stepped-up effort to enhance India's ties with African nations, Minister of State for External Affairs Anand Sharma announced at the African Union Summit on January 29 in Addis Ababa that the Government of India will host a Summit of the India-Africa Forum. The Summit will take place in Delhi in April with the Heads of State and Foreign Ministers of South Africa, Nigeria, Libya, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal, Uganda and Zambia invited. The Summit of the India-Africa Forum is part of India's strategy to diversify its relationship and cooperation in Africa. Media sources report that the summit is a response to China's bid to cement trade ties and secure natural resources with its November 2006

Africa Summit attended by fifty countries at which China pledged USD 5 billion in loans and credits. India's goal is to compete with China for influence in Africa. It will seek energy resources, gold, metallic ores and inorganic chemicals. In addition to opening up markets for its cotton yarn, drugs, machines, and agro-chemicals, India is keen on implementing a pan-African e-network project that will provide tele-medicine and tele-education to fifty-three African nations.

Leaders Continue to Beat a Path to India's Door

13. (U) India is opening its doors this month to leaders from around the world. Subsequent to the January visits of the French president and the Greek and British prime ministers, India will be receiving or has just recently hosted the Maldives president, the Danish, Finnish, Russian and Norwegian prime ministers, the Turkish and Kyrgyz foreign ministers and the Canadian defense minister. Ali Babacan becomes the first Turkish foreign minister to visit India in 30 years. The gist of the visits, based on what open sources and brief conversations with colleagues from other embassies, is the standard: greater bilateral cooperation on economic, trade, defense and climate change issues. Comments made by these visitors prior to coming to Delhi centered around generic strengthening and developing economic and trade ties.

14. (SBU) Comment: The U.S. interest in these visits is mostly indirect, but they exemplify the ever-increasing competition for India's attention and for the Indian market. Additionally, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Russia and Canada are all Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) members, and the GOI will

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surely be asking them for support for the civil-nuclear deal while they are here. Also, for India each one of these countries is a potential vote in the UN General Assembly for a rotating Security Council seat in 2010-2012, and a permanent seat in the future.

Three UP MPs Disqualified, Telling By-elections to Follow

15. (U) On January 29 Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee disqualified three Uttar Pradesh (UP) Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) MPs who had defected to the Samajwadi Party (SP). The three MPs were elected in 2004 under the BSP banner but have effectively been SP members for over a year, even campaigning against the BSP in the 2007 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections. Under a 1985 anti-defection law which sought to discourage the increasingly common practice of legislators switching parties for monetary or political payoffs, the BSP filed a petition against the three MPs in December of 2006. The case took over a year but eventually the BSP's position held. Chatterjee's ruling vacates the seats and by-elections must now be held within six months.

16. (SBU) Comment: Based on the statements and actions of the MPs, all three had clearly left the BSP. Chatterjee's ruling does not appear politically motivated; it would have been extremely difficult for the Speaker to rule against the BSP in such a clear cut case. The decision sets the stage for a showdown between the BSP and the SP soon. The three former MPs will likely stand as SP candidates in what will be not only a referendum on one year of Mayawati rule, but also a preview of upcoming national polls. While the contest looks to be a hard-fought BSP vs. SP affair, Congress and the BJP will likely use the opportunity to assess their own ties to Mayawati and test their 2009 electoral messages in the most crucial state of all. End Comment.

BJP Renews Battle Against Election Commissioner Navin Chawla

17. (SBU) On January 30, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

petitioned Chief Election Commissioner N. Gopalaswami demanding removal of his fellow Election Commissioner Navin Chawla on grounds of Chawla's "close proximity" to the Congress party and, hence, his lack of fairness and non-partisanship. A former bureaucrat, Chawla is known for his closeness to the Congress party's Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. As Secretary to the Governor of Delhi during the emergency years of 1975-77, Chawla is believed to have played a hand in helping Sanjay Gandhi in many of his high-handed actions such as the compulsory sterilizations and demolition of residential areas. Later, during the Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi regimes, Chawla enjoyed patronage of Congress ministers and always ended up with plum postings. He and his wife run an NGO that has received donations from various Congress parliamentarians.

¶8. (SBU) The genesis of BJP's campaign goes back to 2005 when Chawla was appointed an Election Commissioner by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. The BJP petitioned then-President Abdul Kalam against Chawla's appointment. That request was sent to the UPA government for action. When the UPA government ignored it, the BJP filed a petition in the Supreme Court in 2006

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demanding Chawla's removal. The Court suggested that the Chief Election Commissioner has the authority to decide on such matters. The current petition (signed by 180 National Democratic Alliance members of parliament) is a result of the Supreme Court ruling. The Indian Constitution allows the removal of Election Commissioner by the President of India on the recommendation of the Chief Election Commissioner.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: The BJP's campaign against Chawla is rooted in the fear that he would become the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) later this year when Gopalaswami retires. The CEC is unlikely to recommend Chawla's dismissal purely since it would have to be proved that Chawla had taken biased decisions as an Election Commissioner. However, the filing of the petition gives BJP another issue to beat the Congress party with as the country heads into what could turn out to be closely fought elections before May 2009.

Chavez to Address Indian Communist Parties?

¶10. (SBU) Indian media reported on February 5 that both the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) and the smaller Communist Party of India (CPI) invited Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to address their party Congress meetings. Noting that Chavez's tirades against the United States have made him very popular in Indian leftist circles, the story said that Chavez would "add sting and color to the events which are set to be dominated by anti-Americanism." The CPI-M Congress is scheduled to be held in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, from March 29 to April 3; the CPI Congress in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, from March 23 to March 27. Delegates from communist parties from China, Russia, North Korea, and Cuba routinely attend these party meetings. Media and Kerala CPI-M contacts confirmed to Consulate General Chennai that the parties had invited Chavez but added that they did not think the invitations were serious and that Chavez is very unlikely to attend.

Another Bomb Blast in Bhutan

¶11. (SBU) On February 3, a bomb blast shook the southern Bhutanese Samste district, which borders the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal. No casualties were reported. One bomb exploded behind a government building and police safely defused two more near the residence of two election officials. Though the police have not detained any suspects, they found leaflets at the scene in which the Communist Party of Bhutan threatened to stop National Assembly elections.

¶12. (SBU) This attack is the latest in a string of bombings Bhutan has seen leading up to landmark National Assembly elections on March 24. On January 20, four districts in Bhutan, including the capital, Thimphu, were rocked by bomb blasts (ref A). At that time, the Royal Bhutan Police attributed the bombings to one of the three usual Nepali-based suspects: the Communist party of Bhutan, the Bhutan Maoist Party, and the Bhutan Tigers Force. However, an unknown group, the United Revolutionary Front of Bhutan (URFB), claimed responsibility. One Thimphu-based diplomat told Poloff that Bhutanese officials from the Home Ministry and Ministry of Foreign Affairs briefed third country national officials in Thimphu on the attacks. Bhutanese

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officials said they heard the URFB took responsibility for the attacks but the officials knew nothing more about the group.

¶13. (SBU) The URFB again claimed responsibility for the February 3 blast. In a statement distributed by the Press Trust of India News Agency, a man named Karma, who claimed to be the URFB Commander in Chief, asked India to side with the Bhutanese people and not the King. He demanded the Election Commission suspend polls until all national issues, especially human rights, citizenship rights, political rights, and the Bhutanese refugee problem in Nepal are resolved. And, he threatened that the recent bombings are only, "the beginning of our struggle against the regime and it will continue until we achieve our goal."

¶14. (SBU) Comment: Very little is known about the URFB, but it appears to be Nepali-based, and demands repatriation and equal rights for ethnic Nepali Bhutanese refugees. Regardless of who is responsible for the bombings, Bhutan is seeing a rise in attacks. Bhutan will have to intensify its vigilance on security matters in the coming weeks leading up to the National Assembly election on March 24. End Comment.

Bhutan Prepares for Bird Flu Spread from West Bengal

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¶15. (U) On February 2 the Bhutanese Government banned all poultry imports from India, which is battling an Avian Influenza (AI) outbreak in West Bengal. Since January 15, the H5N1 virus has affected poultry in thirteen districts of West Bengal. Two of these districts border Bhutan. Bhutan's major poultry supplier is located in one of the 13 affected districts. The Bhutanese Government has instituted preventive measures against the bird flu including clinical surveillance, cancellation of import licenses, poultry farmer awareness and increased security at legal and illegal entry points. The ban will remain in place until West Bengal is officially AI-free.

¶16. (U) Comment: With bird flu spreading in the region, Bhutan is joining other governments like the state of Assam authorities in taking precautionary measures to respond to the outbreak. Bhutan enacted the same preventive measures in 2007 due to an outbreak in Manipur. Bhutan only lifted the poultry ban after the bird flu threat was completely eliminated. The same course of action is expected this time. End Comment.

Continued Controversy Persuades Sania Mirza to Skip Bangalore Open

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¶17. (SBU) Fed up with religious, legal and political pressure, Muslim tennis star and Hyderabad-native Sania Mirza will skip the Bangalore Open in March. Mirza, who is ranked 27th in the world and widely popular in most Indian circles, has drawn continued criticism from conservatives while competing. Islamic fundamentalists have pronounced her court attire indecent and recently registered a trespassing case against her in Hyderabad for an advertisement shoot in a

local mosque. In January, a private citizen filed a court complaint in Bhopal under the Insult to National Honour Act over her alleged (and trifling) disrespect for the Indian

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flag. "Every time I play in India there has been some kind of problem," Mizra told the press.

¶18. (SBU) Comment: Although a symbol of national pride for most Indians on and off the court, Mirza cannot escape ridiculous controversy for wearing tennis clothes while playing tennis. Fundamentalism appears to have won this match and robbed Indians of watching their 21-year-old phenom compete at home. On February 6, the tabloid newspaper "Mail Today" (an India Today & Daily Mail (UK) partner) published a full page incendiary photo of Mirza that is disgraceful even by Hollywood standards. Media hype is adding fuel to the fire. All legal cases are currently pending and any conviction is extremely unlikely. The scorecard of Conservative Islam vs. 21-year old Mirza's hemlines and necklines currently stands at match point but many Indians applaud her for standing up to the bullies.  
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